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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000446

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: In meeting, senior MP from President's party discusses campaign, expresses worries re LTTE situation

Refs: Colombo 440, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Polchief met March 10 with Dinesh Gunawardena, a senior MP in President Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) party. Queried about the April 2 parliamentary election, he stated that he thought the alliance between the SLFP and radical JVP was having "a very good" campaign and would win a majority of seats. He allowed that the UNP campaign machine was just getting warmed up after a slow start, however. Re the LTTE split, he worried that it might hurt the peace process. Gunawardena's views tended to reflect the widespread sense that the SLFP-JVP alliance started out fast, but that the UNP may be set to stage a strong comeback. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) MEETING WITH SENIOR MP: Polchief met March 10 with Dinesh Gunawardena, a longtime MP for President Kumaratunga's PA political grouping. (Gunawardena, 55, comes from a prominent political family that holds diverse views. One of his brothers, Prasanna, is the UNP mayor of Colombo and another brother, Indika, is a leader of the Communist Party.) Asked about the April 2 parliamentary election campaign, Gunawardena responded that the alliance between President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was having "a very good" campaign. (The SLFP is the main constituent element in the PA. Most elements of the PA are supporting the SLFP-JVP alliance, including Gunawardena's small Mahajama Eksath Peramuna, "MEP," party. FYI: The MEP, a Trotskyite party, was founded by Gunawardena's father, Philip, and was very strong in the 1940s and 1950s.) Rallies had gone well and party members seemed "highly enthusiastic" about the campaign. The SLFP-JVP planned to make a big push during the final three weeks of the campaign. This would involve many large rallies in the big cities and hundreds of smaller rallies at the village level. He also noted that the election manifesto of the United People's Freedom Alliance, "UPFA," (the technical name of the SLFP-JVP alliance) would be issued shortly. (FYI: The manifesto, covering UPFA stands on the peace process and economic matters, was issued on March 11.)

3. (C) UNP WILL TRY HARD: Gunawardena noted that the campaign of the United National Party (UNP) led by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was just getting warmed up after a slow start. The UNP appeared to have a lot of money and was clearly preparing to launch a large-scale, all-out campaign during the last two weeks or so of the campaign. That said, the UNP campaign was starting up late in the cycle and it would be difficult for it to recover lost ground. Asked for his prediction for the April 2 election, Gunawardena replied that much hinged on the final weeks of the campaign as "many things could happen." All things being equal, however, he thought that the SLFP-JVP alliance would win an outright majority in Parliament (113 seats or more). If it came just below that target, he thought the alliance would almost certainly be able to attract smaller parties, or perhaps defectors from the UNP, that would allow it to form the majority in Parliament.

4. (C) WORRIES ABOUT LTTE SPLIT: Asked about the recent split in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization between northern and eastern elements (see Refels), Gunawardena responded that he worried that it might hurt the peace process. Fighting between the LTTE factions seemed likely and it could easily spill over in the Eastern Province. Non-combatants could be caught in the crossfire, which in turn might lead to Sri Lankan military intervention of some sort. Gunawardena noted that some elements in the SLFP-JVP alliance wanted the GSL to get involved on the side of Karuna, so as to ensure that the split in the LTTE was a permanent one. Gunawardena was of two minds about this. On the one hand, it appeared a good idea

for the GSL to try to undermine "one of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups." On the other hand, the situation in the east seemed very fluid and it might be best for the government to act with restraint. All in all, he thought that President Kumaratunga's current "hands-off" policy toward the LTTE split was the best choice for the moment.

15. (C) COMMENT: Gunawardena's views on the campaign tended to reflect the widespread sense that the SLFP-JVP alliance started out fast, but that the UNP may be set to stage a strong comeback. UNP officials we have recently met with appear much more confident now than they did when the election was called in early February. It is not clear why the UNP campaign was originally so moribund, but the party clearly did not want elections and seemed a bit shell-shocked in the aftermath of President Kumaratunga's November 2003 takeover of three key ministries. All that said, the SLFP-JVP alliance remains highly active and is also set to make a strong push in the next several weeks. It is still too early to really predict, but most observers continue to believe -- contrary to Gunawardena's view that the SLFP-JVP will win an outright majority -- that Sri Lanka is headed toward a tight election and possibly a hung Parliament. END COMMENT.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

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